

A couple are on a road trip, driving from Maryland to California, currently driving through Nebraska. They stop at purposefully manufactured tourist sites like the country's largest ball of yarn. His name is Mattias, and her name is Natalie, but he still calls her Rawr, and she still calls him Captain Murphy.

Captain Murphy's in the passenger seat and leaning against the door, one hand out the window, all his fingers spread out and twitching a little, like whiskers. She feels good in the driver's seat, the birdsong hits the windows as they drive past Billings and Orange. Captain Murphy only listens to two CDs, letting each one turn over and repeat.

"I guess we know which album you'd listen to if you were on a desert island and could only listen to one album."

"No," said Captain Murphy, "It would be very hard to decide which one to bring."

"Actually, what food you would bring to a desert island isn't really a good question, since you have to consider survival. Most people would probably die in a few weeks if they ate the food they liked the most." The sun's beaming straight down, sliding into the car like a slot. Outside there's corn, corn, corn, soybeans. "A better question would be what food you would like to eat if you could only eat one food in heaven."

"That's easy. If you become an angel, you eat angel food. Angel food cake, I mean. God sprinkles it into the clouds, like fish food." Rawr sprawled in the sun and laughed, letting the sun soak into her skin as if she is a lizard.

They were walking at night again, along the side of cornfields again, cutting through the lawns of houses made of the shadows of bird feeders and the round shapes of shrubs. Dogs were

barking. Once in a while, they turned a corner and a rabbit hopped into a clipped bush, ears shivering against its head. All the houses have big windows here, like the eyes of nonstandard cartoon characters.

“I keep thinking about people could be different, if they just had different parents. My parents weren’t amazing, but they were still good. They did their jobs, you know?”

“But I just...the fact that the people who made me are the people who care about me. What a coincidence, really.” He looked up at the moon, which looked like a bad onion.

“I feel like I could never talk to my parents.”

“But, you know, they were still there, right? They still did their jobs?”

“I guess. It’s so fucked up. My dad couldn’t even speak English.” Sometimes she felt like his therapist. His dad was from Chile and fought in the war against Pinochet.

“My dad was the kind of person – we couldn’t really talk, either. We were too different.” There were deer in the field, a few standing on the tips of their hooves, like sentries, some curled up on the grass like dogs.

“He just, you know, he actually can’t talk to me.” Rawr leads Captain Murphy into the middle of a field. They take big steps over the overlong, dripping grass, following the tracks of deer.

“Remember when our parents came to pick us up from jail after that night at the ihop? My dad was so angry. Your mom looked pretty pissed off, too.”

“She wasn’t that mad. It was fine. I deserved it.”

“Yeah, my dad’s kind of the bad cop in my house, my mom just watches while my dad gets angry. I always used to watch his face, I thought it looked like a fish. I’d just be watching

the movement of his lips while he lectured me.” Rawr looks at the corn on either side, flickering like candlelight, going and going and going into the darkness.

Captain Murphy thinks about the book his grandfather gave him once. It was about a kingdom where each person could see a different amount of time into the future. Or that’s what he thought he knew the book was about. The book was written in Spanish and displayed a person with a clock on a wire wound round his neck and a feather drooping from one hand. It looked magical.

“Why did you start writing that webcomic?” she asked, after ten or fifteen acres of corn. They are sitting down in the parking lot, eye level with the few cars squatting all around. The parking lot that spreads out every way. Like the surface of a planet. “Not why, but I mean, where do you get your ideas? How do you produce so much?”

“I get them from being alive. Where do you get your ideas?” He lies down on his belly on the parking lot, still a little warm. He watches the tiny white bits of rock smooshed into the tar. They look special, they have a special name, quartz. Quartz is a gemstone and he wonders what it’s doing mashed into the tar.

“Tell me a story,” Rawr says. “About one of the characters in your webcomic. Let me know what’s going on in that world.”

“I can’t. You need to read it, I can’t just tell you what I wrote.” Captain Murphy cups his soft hands around her head, and fills her mouth with kisses.

“Why don’t you write any female characters?” She wriggles away. “Just curious.”

“I don’t know. I guess I should try. All my characters are white men. And I’m not even a white man. Or they’re cockroaches. And I’m not a cockroach, either. Identity gets confused in writing.” He sketches a few houses, a road with his finger on the tar.

Rawr draws a horse with her finger. Then she draws cockroaches crawling along its spine. “But you can choose the identities of your characters. You can challenge yourself.”

“You know, you act pretty white sometimes. That’s a pretty white thing to say. I’m not trying to be offensive, I just wanted to let you know.” Captain Murphy rolls onto his back and watches the stars. He sees a shooting star dart like a little fish across the sky.

Rawr laughs and draws paper hats on the cockroaches’ head. They are an army of cockroaches, marching to the horse head to fight.

He knew he felt wrongly about his father’s country. But he had a stereotype, and it went like this: soldiers standing rank and file to run and smash things in slum houses made of cardboard. Skinny brown children struck by stray bullets. Sociopath aristocrats laughing at the torture of rebel leaders. Guns, germs and steel. Like the book, guns, germs and steel. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. All this, even though Chile’s a rich country now, though of course not as rich as here.

They stay another night in Big Springs. Captain Murphy finishes his comic, the one expected by his fans every three weeks. He’s two days late as usual. Captain Murphy leaves the hotel before Rawr wakes up and walks along the furrow of dirt on the side of a cornfield. The dirt path, hard as concrete, leads into a few acres of soybeans and back to corn. He listens to a

song off one of his two favorite albums, over and over and over, getting hypnotized. There's a narrow stream in between the stalks, just corn then mud then water. He walks along the stream until he finds some trees and a stump next to the stream. He sits on a stump and starts to draw.

Back at the hotel, it's 11:12. Rawr lies on the bed and thinks about her past. Rawr remembered summer days in the hospital, before her parents realized she was allergic to high fructose corn syrup. She spent a month and a half eating hospital food and throwing up before the doctors realized what was wrong. *I once was locked down into tubes, people turned me on and off like a dial, people open and shut me. An open and shut case. Everything connected to flimsy plastic straws. I lost that summer, my lost summer, I felt like an alien that year, like a raw smooth toothless land dolphin.*

Rawr logs in to Captain Murphy's computer to look at Captain Murphy's activity on the forums and blogs. Captain Murphy has two blogs, one with philosophical updates, links to Lynda Barry interviews and covers of obscure comics from the eighties. The other dedicated to updates of his own comics. Rawr visits the last page of the cockroach comic, the latest update posted by Captain Murphy on March 21st, 10:43, two years ago.

The main character cockroach talks with a smaller female in a desert landscape, ground cracked and baked by the sun. If you read the previous comic you know the landscape is an abandoned porcelain bathtub in the middle of a field. They talk about the mysterious disappearance of a group of cockroaches that worshipped the sun, that made sacrifices. "I heard they threw themselves on a great fire, because it was their holy sign, it meant the sun had come to the Earth," said the smaller female cockroach.

Rawr glances over the final panel, the usual close up of the main character, bug eyes, antennae sprouting up like cartoon flowers. The weekly messages Captain Murphy posted in the margin beneath each comic: “Happy Easter/Passover/Spring, followers. I’ve been worshipping the increasing amount of light coming through the window of my room. Sorry (for the thousandth time), about the late update. Capt M.”

Fans waited for weeks for the next update, and the last panel stood there, calcifying. Rawr waited for weeks, not asking Captain Murphy, just waiting.

Captain Murphy says he’s finished with the cockroach comic, he’s left it and can’t stand to see it anymore; now he’s writing a comic about the adventures of the ghosts of historical figures. Actually, not all of Captain Murphy’s characters are white, but they are all men. Edward Abbey and Aaron Burr are the two main characters. As far as Rawr can tell, the comic is surreal, stream of consciousness. All the characters are sketched in charcoal. Captain M’s body is splotched with grey when he comes home, like a rabbit, like a cow. A lot of people don’t like Captain Murphy’s latest comic as much as the cockroach comic. People don’t understand it, people dismiss it as the abstract nonsense of an artist with nothing else to say. But a new niche fan club has grown up around Captain Murphy’s new world to make up for the fans lost. Rawr reads Captain Murphy’s posts answering fans’ questions:

“My ideas come from lying in bed, imagining loneliness as birds with teeth. They come from watching everything. I want to watch as many things as I can. I like the idea of being a bird watcher, or a plane watcher, of understanding the minute structures of ordinary things.”

It’s 3:00 in the afternoon, and the sun’s shining on the backs of big, confident squirrels that half-walk, half-jump outside the window. It’s a good answer, Rawr supposes, but

pretentious. Rawr lights one of Captain Murphy's American Spirits and smokes it like a hamburger, like the best meal she's had in a while.

Rawr eats dinner at the diner downtown. She sees a large father come in. Talking very loudly to three children, uncoordinated children looking at everything, running. A kid's foot hits the edge of her chair. The five or six year old girl says loudly that she's going to order the "famous fried chicken." Rawr inhabits the little girl's body for a second. The girl making a tradition of only ordering the fried chicken, week in and week out. Everyone in the family referring to the chicken as the "Famous Fried," an in joke only funny in the restaurant with the magic plastic menus that put a goofy spell over everyone. "I want the Famous Fried Chicken!" the girl calling to the waiter, as soon as she walked to the table. The dad laughing, the silly names approved by him, the restaurant is their place, the polka dot tablecloths and banana milkshakes a reference known only to them.

The waitress comes over and she suddenly needs to order something, so she orders the fried chicken with a side of zucchini, the vegetable of the day. She wonders if Captain Murphy will wander in, since it's the only restaurant in town. There's a good chance he will. He'll be forced to, if he wants food.

Captain Murphy doesn't show up. He's probably fasting or something, Rawr thinks. Sometimes he forgets to eat when he's drawing. Rawr walks the streets, in a huge square, past the familiar brick library, the post office, the rows of big eyed houses. *When I was young, my dad came to visit me in the hospital. My dad watched over me, like a large concerned bird. He didn't tell me I wasn't responsible anymore. He asked me questions like he was trying to interview me for a documentary.*

In Captain Murphy's comic, Aaron Burr's riding off to duel with George Washington's son. George Washington's son is an American hero, beautiful, idealistic, rallier of the people in a smudged suit with big words. George Washington's son wants to duel Aaron Burr, who killed Hamilton, Aaron Burr, timeless, an old alligator. Edward Abbey's riding up in the background, kicking up huge clods of dirt that fly through the air, he's howling like a coyote singing a country song.

It is 2 am when Captain Murphy returns and climbs into bed. He licks her face, like a cat, and rubs against her breasts, and falls asleep. Captain Murphy's bone tired. Hamilton's going to slice George Washington's son open from neck to groin and Abbey will stay up all night and sing coyote folk songs over his grave. Captain Murphy knows what songs Edward Abbey will sing, and he's trying to figure out how to draw them.

Rawr opens the curtains and the moon shines through, the corn. She wonders if there are animals under the corn, skunks and cats and squirrels sliding under the corn, moving around the stalks like the trunks of trees.

Rawr creeps to her tablet and draws. She draws a wolf being eaten by worms from the inside. She draws a squirrel sleeping on the hood of a car. She draws a cockroach doctor looking at a pigeon's feathers through a magnifying glass. She pads carefully along the hotel floor, watching her shadow against the wall. Outside the moon looks fake, the corn is spreading forever like a lawn. The computer is on the desk, USB hanging from it, and it seems important, sacred almost to open the laptop, to create another source of light. She is plugging in the tablet, logging



into Captain Murphy's admit account, and downloading the drawing to the cockroach website. She guesses Captain Murphy will find out pretty soon, from one of the fans who still checks the website every day. He checks his email, checks his tumblr and blog comments every day. He will know it's her, immediately, soon. When the sun rises. It will be a surprise, a strange present. It will be a "little present," like her father called the mice delivered by the cat.

The next day, Rawr goes to the diner for lunch. Captain Murphy's already eaten, room service. When Rawr gets home, Capt M's lying on his back like a lion in the sun. Rawr looks at him there on the floor and fills a glass of water from the sink. Rawr slicks her forehead with water and a few fat drops run into her mouth.

"Rawr..." Captain Murphy says, when Rawr walks back in. "Come down here with me."

She sits down and they hug. They sway back and forth and bump harmlessly against the walls like a big beach ball. Together they roll and knocks over a pack of American Spirits stood up on end.

Captain Murphy holds up shiny grey hands, magnet hands, superhero hands. Rawr looks down at her hands, arms, huge black swaths, black on her face. "You look like you have warpaint on," Captain Murphy says, "You look like a metallic tiger. Rawr..." Captain Murphy makes a line of kisses, from Rawr's arms down to the round dull ends of her fingernails. Rawr kisses Captain Murphy's shoulder blade.

"Rawr?" Capt M looks up with eyes like moons or bad onions. "Can you lend me some cash to get a coffee?" Rawr and Captain Murphy drive to the grocery store. They pick up a watermelon.

"How do you tell when it's ripe?" asks Rawr.

“You lick it,” says Captain Murphy. They take turns licking watermelons.

Rawr stopped to draw animals. She drew a huge wolf on the parking lot slotted between a pet store and a hardware store. “Where did you get that chalk?” asked Captain M.

“I don’t even know,” she said, “I just pick stuff up and put it my pocket.” She drew a smaller house for the wolf to stand next to and stare down at with curious apathy. Then she observed the whole effect for a second, and he watched her taking stock. Then she drew ants with mice on their backs, clutching reins, riding in lines from the shingles of the house. She signed it Rawr, in a loose scrawl so you couldn’t quite tell what it said. Cpt Murphy stood back and took it in. He didn’t ask what it was. He already know. It reminded Capt Murphy the drawing he had done of cockroaches praying to a water tower. It was just like that.